For Native America, the bison is the elder brother and teacher. For the Great Plains, he may be the salvation.

by Winona LaDuke

buffalo nation

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In February 1999, Rosalie Little Thunder and Joseph Chasing Horse led some 40 Native people on *Tatanka Oyate Mani*, the Walk for the Buffalo Nation, from South Dakota's Black Hills to the stone archway of Yellowstone's northern entrance. It was there that Yanktonai Lakota Gary Silk danced for the buffalo as Horace Axtell, a descendant of Nez Percé Chief Joseph, prayed and sang with his sons, their clear voices resonating to the mountains. Through sleet, wind, and blizzards, Little Thunder and the other Tatanka Oyate Mani participants walked a 507-mile spiritual journey along seemingly endless yellow lines through the Northern Plains, jostled by barreling semitrailers, and prayed for the restoration of the Buffalo Nation.

To Native America, the buffalo is the elder brother, the teacher. In Lakota culture, it is said that before you kill a buffalo you must perform the Buffalo Kill ceremony. You must offer prayers and talk to the animal's spirit. Then, and only then, will the buffalo surrender itself. Only then can you kill the buffalo.

"The First People were the Buffalo People, our ancestors

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which came from the sacred Black Hills, the heart of everything that is," explains Chief Arvol Looking Horse, one of the Lakotas' most revered holy men. "I humbly ask all nations to respect our way of life, because in our prophecies, if there is no buffalo, then life as we know it will cease to exist."

There is a similar teaching in my own culture, the Anishinaabeg. During midwinter ceremonies, an elder's voice will rise as the drum quiets. "The buffalo gave their lives so that we might live," she will say. "Now it is our turn to speak for the buffalo, to stand for our relatives."

The fate of the buffalo has vast implications for native ecosystems as well as Native peoples. Buffalo determine landscapes. For thousands of years, the Great Plains, the largest single ecosystem in North America, was maintained by the buffalo. By their sheer numbers, weight, and behavior, they cultivated the prairie. It is said that their thundering hooves danced on the earth as they moved by the millions; their steps resounded in the vast underground water system, the Ogallala Aquifer, stimulating its health and seeding the prairies. And their destruction set in motion the ecological and economic crisis that now afflicts the region.

A bison skull in Yellowstone National Park, ground zero in the fight to bring back the buffalo.

In the mid-19th century, 50 million bison ranged the prairie. There were then more than 250 types of grass, along with profusions of prairie dogs, purple corn flower, prairie turnips, mushrooms, and a host of other species listed today as endangered or protected.

This natural balance has shifted considerably. Biological diversity has plummeted. Those 50 million buffalo have been replaced by farms and 45 million cattle. Due to massive cultivation and irrigation, the Great Plains' topsoil is eroding and its groundwater dwindling. The prairies are teeming with pumps, irrigation systems, combines, and toxic chemicals. Much of the original ecosystem has been destroyed, and what remains is in a precarious state. No other biome on the continent has suffered so much loss.

THE GREAT PLAINS REGION SPANS 40 PERCENT OF THE United States but holds just a small fraction of its population. Roughly one in four counties are in economic and demographic decline as well as social distress, and have reverted to what is technically called "frontier status," with fewer than two residents per square mile. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed in 1893, but he may have been a bit premature: The frontier, as determined by population, is in a permanent state of flux. In North Dakota, the frontier zone shrank to 21 percent in 1920, but over the past 50 years has stretched again to cover three-fifths of the state.

In 1990, delinquency rates for holders of Farm Home Administration loans hit 26 percent in North Dakota, 42 percent in South Dakota, and 28 percent in Nebraska; rates for production loans exceeded 40 percent in all three states. Average net cash returns per farm in North Dakota, for instance, were just over $13,000 in 1997, down 37 percent from 1992 and roughly on a par with average farm incomes after World War II. Beyond these chronic troubles, bad years can bring drought, floods, and wheat scab. Little wonder farmers are calling it quits.

Yet an ironic reversal of history is taking place here. While non-Indians, farmers and otherwise, are fleeing the rural areas, Native populations are increasing. Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma all suffered net population losses between 1985 and 1990. Yet many Indian reservations' populations have doubled during the past two decades. These new demographics offer hope. What we are witnessing may be nothing less than the return of the Indian and the buffalo, the ebb of the frontier, and, in its own way, a regional reversal of Manifest Destiny. In the minds and hearts of the buffalo peoples, the prairies are where the buffalo are meant to be, the place where the wind calls their names. Buffalo are the animals of the past, yes, but they are also the animals of the future.

AS YOUR EYES SCAN THE PINE RIDGE BUFFALO PASTURE IN southwest South Dakota, one thing stands out clearly: prairie. Native prairie grasses and plants blanket the uncultivated tribal land. This is also the case on Yankton, Cheyenne River, and a number of other Northern Plains reservations. Simply stated, some of the last vestiges of the region's historic biodiversity are found on its Indian reservations.

Nationally, 41 separate tribes now belong to the Intertribal Bison Cooperative, whose sole mission is buffalo

FRANK S. BALTHIS

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restoration. On reservations from Taos Pueblo to Standing Rock in North Dakota, Native communities are actively welcoming home their relations.

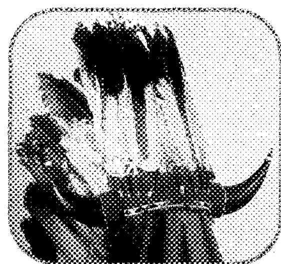
The Ironcloud family brought their first buffalo home to Pine Ridge in 1997, and now have a small herd in a 1,200-acre pasture. Ethelyne Ironcloud's brother, Edward "Buzz" Ironcloud, is in charge of the Knife Chief Buffalo Project near Porcupine. The Knife Chief Project, like the Seventh Generation Buffalo Cooperative on the Standing Rock Reservation, is founded on the restoration of small herds, using methods employed successfully by the Arkansas-based Heifer Project—like donating calves to families who, in turn, pass along one of their gift animal's female calves so others can breed herds of their own.

Richard Sherman is a lanky wildlife biologist with the Oglala Lakota Parks and Recreation Department on Pine Ridge. I try to keep up with him as he strides purposefully through the largest of several pastures for the Oglala bison herd, a 17,000-acre expanse of real-live prairie. He stops to point out various buffalo delicacies: prairie turnips, sage, mushrooms. The pasture is a model of Sherman's vision for Lakota land stewardship, "a culturally appropriate system based on the values and philosophy of the Lakota people."

Nebraska's Winnebago Indians established a bison refuge on 240 acres of rented land in 1992, after joining the Intertribal Bison Cooperative. The tribe's goal is to have 200 head on 1,000 acres.

"It doesn't seem to take too long to heal the land," Sherman tells me. "It's happening right here in our buffalo pasture."

And not only here; buffalo restoration is taking root across the prairie. Pine Ridge's Akcita Buffalo Society, for example, now provides buffalo for four projects, each of which has received a "seed" herd of cows and bulls to start full-fledged



Some of the last vestiges of the Great Plains' historic biodiversity are found on its Indian reservations.

TOP: JOEL SARTORE   BOTTOM: PHOTO BY DAVID G. FITZGERALD

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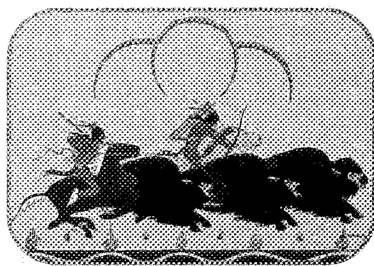

"The underlying teaching," says Faith Spotted Eagle, "is the primacy of the relationship with buffalo."

LEFT: "BUFFALO HUNT" PAINTING BY SOLOMON MCCOMBS PHOTO BY DAVID G. FITZGERALD

herds of their own. The projects keep 60 percent of all new calves, and give the rest to Oglala Parks and Recreation. The society is hoping to seed additional herds over time.

Farther west, Ben Sherman, Richard's brother, has a vision of his own. He found a buffalo jump site near Beulah, Wyoming, in the northwest corner of the Black Hills region, where more than 20,000 buffalo are believed to have been killed over hundreds of years by ancient buffalo hunters. Ben wants to establish an interpretive center here, modeled on Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Center in Alberta. But history is only the beginning. Over the past few years he has cultivated a relationship with the Nature Conservancy, which has purchased 2,000 acres in the area and is interested in restoration. "We want to run buffalo up there," he says. "I'd just like to see buffalo back in the hills again."

To the south, Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico has maintained a buffalo herd since the 1930s for traditional subsistence and ceremonial purposes. With Taos buffalo program director Richard Archuleta, I wandered out for a closer look at these beautiful animals. They are relations. Today, the tribe's herd numbers 170, double its size a few years ago, and resides on 500 acres.

Such developments flow directly from the wisdom of Native teachings. The Braveheart Women's Society, or *Inhanktunwan Winyan*, has spent the past six years working closely with more than 70 young women on the Yankton Reservation to keep alive and restore the traditional ways. "The primary role that women had was dividing up the buffalo once the buffalo were killed," explains Faith Spotted Eagle, a Braveheart mentor. "When women had the relationship with buffalo we were able to learn from that, and pass that on to younger women. The underlying teaching is the primacy of the relationship with buffalo."

ROSALIE LITTLE THUNDER, AN ARTIST AND LONGTIME ACTIVIST, tells a story about the 1855 Little Thunder massacre in Nebraska, when General William Selby Harney came to the Lakota community and was greeted with the truce flag and a meal of salt pork and hardtack. "While this was going on, there was a grandmother standing there with her ten-year-old grandson. She told him to hide where the tall grass was. They started shooting down the people then. And when she was shot, she threw herself and her shawl on top of that little boy. That way she hid him. She hid him and died.

"That little boy," she adds, "he was my grandfather."

Nearly 70 people were killed that day. A century and a half later, a buffalo slaughter in Yellowstone National Park brought it all back for Little Thunder. "I had my ten-year-old grandson standing next to me," she says. "And they started killing the buffalo. Just like that, shooting them down. I covered his face with my shawl and told him to go move."

On March 5, 1997, Little Thunder and a small group of spiritual leaders, including Arvol Looking Horse, were among 75 people who congregated around 147 bison in a holding corral to pray for the buffalo spirits. During a lunch

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break they heard the shots. The Montana Department of Livestock had killed eight buffalo a mile to the north. Little Thunder and several others wanted to go to the site to pray, but sheriff's deputies warned them about trespassing on private land. Little Thunder walked forward to talk to one of the deputies and, as the would-be prayer group looked on helplessly, was arrested, handcuffed, and taken away in a patrol vehicle.

The arrest was the spark for a burgeoning movement to halt one of the most brutal wildlife slaughters in recent history: the killing of 1,100 bison that winter, followed by sporadic killings each year since. The cause of all this killing is Montana ranchers' fear that diseased bison will give their cattle brucellosis, which can induce spontaneous abortion. (According to the National Academy of Sciences, interspecies transmission has been demonstrated in only a few controlled situations.) That the movement to stop the slaughter has caught fire is clear from the actions of grassroots groups, a barrage of litigation, and the outrage of some 65,000 people who have spoken out at public hearings on the future of the Yellowstone herd.

It's a high-stakes mission. The killings, says Ethelyne Ironcloud, are "really devastating to not only Buffalo Nation but to the Indian nations as well. We believe that the way they treat the buffalo is the way that they treat the Indians." That is why the Yellowstone slaughter cuts to the heart of the Lakota and other buffalo cultures of the Great Plains.

No one argues that Yellowstone, an island of wildness in a sea of civilization, is ecologically ideal for buffalo. "Because biology has been absent from design decisions," writes conservation biologist Reed Noss, "park boundaries do not conform to ecological boundaries and most parks and other reserves are too small to maintain populations of

BOTTOM: TOM BEAN

Buffalo roam at the 1,800-acre, state-run Big Basin Prairie Preserve in Kansas, near the Oklahoma border.

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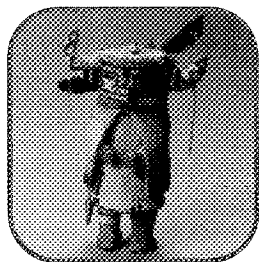

In an echo of Lakota prophecy, a female white buffalo calf, "Miracle," was born in southern Wisconsin in 1995.

wide-ranging animals over the long term or perpetuate natural processes."

Buffalo are a serve-yourself sort of critter, which means they must leave the park as conditions demand. Noss considers that a reserve of under 250,000 acres might sustain a viable population of small herbivorous and omnivorous animals, but says large carnivores and ungulates, such as buffalo, need reserves of anywhere from 2,470,000 acres—already larger than Yellowstone—to ten times that size.

Noss' notions on saving wild species are best described graphically. He and the Wildlands Project, with which he works, are focused primarily on core areas where major populations would reside or, in the case of the buffalo, roam. Connective corridors, protected by buffer zones, would link primary genetic pools, or herds, with other herds, allowing for some genetic diversity. Based on a review of empirical studies, Noss has concluded that an average population of 1,000 animals "must be maintained to assure population viability of species."

Where would the land for such preserves come from? Buy up some private farms and ranches, add in some Native reservation holdings, and you've got a pretty good start. In central South Dakota, for example, Lakota landholdings total over 7.5 million acres, more than twice those of the U.S. government. In his book *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains*, Daniel Licht proposes creating "ecoreserves" by buying out struggling farmers, noting that reserves make better economic and environmental sense than costly farm subsidies. All told, Licht's proposed refuges would cover more than 27,000 square miles, an area he says could support 25,000 buffalo, 300 wolves, 10,000 elk, 15,000 mule deer, and over a million prairie dogs.

Richard Sherman and others on Pine Ridge believe that a buyout of land from ranchers in the Badlands might be the

SIERRA CLUB — SAVING THE WILD PLANET

Speaking Up for the Buffalo

Sierra Club Lends Its Voice—and Clout—to Prairie Restoration

When the U.S. Forest Service released its proposed 15-year management plan for the grasslands of the northern Great Plains last year, the Sierra Club seized the chance to hitch the voice of the people to the thunder of buffalo hooves. Kirk Koepsel of the Club's Northern Plains office says local activists helped generate public comments from more than 10,000 citizens who favor a two-pronged strategy for bringing the buffalo back to the prairie.

First, the Club hopes to work with the Forest Service to increase grasslands acreage devoted to bison by incorporating isolated areas that border already-established publicly owned herds, thus creating a network of bison preserves. In addition to improving prairie health, this would bolster tourism by providing a connection to prairie-region natural history and cultural heritage.

Secondly, says Koepsel, it's essential to help the region's ranchers make the switch from cattle grazing to bison grazing, which already holds potential economic benefits: Due to limited supply and growing demand, buffalo meat commands higher prices than beef, a big plus for struggling ranchers. The Sierra Club is pushing the Forest Service to offer such additional incentives as professional expertise on bison grazing and assistance in improving fencing.

The Club is also pushing to keep remaining wild prairie wild. Forty-five areas totaling 574,000 acres in the national grasslands of the northern Great Plains still qualify for wilderness protection. This acreage accounts for just one-fifth of the region's public land—a tiny fraction of the entire northern Great Plains—and wilderness designation is the best way to preserve its natural character. In addition to bison, the Club aims to restore rare native plants and animals in the Great Plains—including the black-footed ferret, swift fox, prairie dog, mountain plover, and burrowing owl—by better protecting their habitat on the national grasslands.

Several Club chapters are pursuing local efforts on behalf of the buffalo. The National Park Service has proposed to continue cattle grazing indefinitely in the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, but the Kansas Chapter is trying to persuade the agency to reintroduce bison instead. In Montana, Club volunteers are working with tribes and federal land managers to dedicate a quarter-million-acre tract of public land, adjacent to the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, to bison and other prairie species. Special protection, such as national monument status, could provide what national board member Jennifer Ferenstein calls "a connector between ecologically intact areas" that would give buffalo room to run—and Americans a living link to their country's natural history.

TOP: PHOTO BY DAVID G. FITZGERALD

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key to restoring the prairie. They suggest that everyone could tear down their fences and allow buffalo to roam on the collective holdings, which would have a fence around the perimeter. Ranchers, Indians, and federal agencies could then hold shares in the herd.

"There should be some alternative besides killing them in this day and age," says Little Thunder.

In fact, there may be no other alternative than to save them. Such a dream is only fitting. Buffalo are born for the plains. Their massive heads make them uniquely equipped to plow through snow; unlike domesticated cattle, buffalo face the wind, and the windchill. The hardiness that enabled bison to survive the severe climate of the plains is especially impressive when compared with the vulnerability of cattle and other livestock. The deep snow and searing cold of the winter of 1996, for example, left more than 450,000 head of livestock dead on the Great Plains, but took the lives of fewer than 20 bison.

Rosalie Little Thunder (above). The February 1999 Walk for the Buffalo Nation, or *Tatanka Oyate Mani*, was a 507-mile spiritual journey from the Black Hills to Yellowstone (top).

RONNIE FARLEY

According to Lakota prophecies, should Earth, the Mother of All Life, ever be shaken to crisis by the people living upon her, then White Buffalo Calf Woman will return. In the summer of 1995, a female white buffalo calf, "Miracle," was born in southern Wisconsin. Thousands of prayer offerings fluttered on the fence surrounding the calf, now a cow with offspring of her own. Miracle's birth signaled new hope to the buffalo peoples of the Great Plains. The return of White Buffalo Calf Woman symbolizes the dawn of a new era, and with it the promise of the restoration of the prairie, the buffalo cultures, and *Tatanka Oyate*, the Buffalo Nation itself. ▪

WINONA LADUKE *is the founder of the White Earth Recovery Project and the Indigenous Women's Network, and author of* All Our Relations *(South End Press).*